Wise Words and Foolish Words

A Study of the Tongue from the Book of Proverbs

Abstract

The Book of Proverbs gives more sustained attention to the use of words than to perhaps any other subject in its pages, with well over one hundred and fifty proverbs touching on the way human beings speak to one another. This study examines that rich body of teaching under a simple but memorable framework drawn from the acronym FACTS, standing for Few, Apt, Calm, True, and Sweet. Each element illuminates a distinct dimension of wise and godly speech, and together they provide a practical, biblically grounded guide for governing the tongue in ways that honor God and serve our neighbors.

I. Introduction

Most of us grew up with the old children's rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It has a neat, defiant ring to it, and children have found some comfort in it for generations. But the question worth asking is whether it is really true. Are words truly harmless? Can they not wound, destroy, or corrupt? If we come to the Word of God with that question, the answer is quick and clear. Words are not harmless at all.

The Apostle James, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, describes the tongue as a restless evil full of deadly poison, a small member capable of setting the whole course of a life ablaze (James 3:1-12). That is a far cry from the cheerful assurance of the nursery rhyme. And the writer of Proverbs is equally direct: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). Life and death, not something trivial or inconsequential.

The Book of Proverbs repeatedly returns to this subject with notable persistence. It is likely the most commonly addressed topic throughout the entire book. Sometimes, the proverbs highlight the wise and life-giving use of words. Other times, they reveal the foolish and destructive ways words can be used. Often, the contrast is seen within a single verse, as in Proverbs 10:11: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.” Or again in Proverbs 15:4: “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.”

The Apostle Paul echoes this message in his letter to the Ephesians: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29). The consistent biblical message on this point is remarkable. From Proverbs to the Apostles, the message remains the same: control your tongue, use words wisely, and speak in ways that build up rather than harm.

II. The Importance of Words

Before turning to specific guidance from Proverbs, it is worth pausing to ask why words carry such weight in the first place. Why does God’s Word devote such sustained attention to how we speak?

The answer goes back to creation. We are made in the image of God, and God is a God who speaks. He spoke, and creation came into being. Over and over again in the opening chapter of Genesis we read the simple and majestic refrain, “And God said.” The Lord Jesus Christ is himself the Word made flesh, the very self-expression of the eternal God. Our capacity for language is not incidental to our humanity. It is one of the clearest reflections of the image of God in us. Words are a gift from our Creator, and they carry the dignity of that origin.

Beyond that, words reveal the condition of our hearts. The Lord Jesus himself said, “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). What we say discloses what we are. Our words are not merely sounds in the air. They are windows into the inner life. And because they emerge from the heart, they will one day be called into account. The Lord said plainly that men will give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken, and that by their words they will be acquitted or condemned (Matthew 12:36-37).

Given all of this, the governing question of our study is a natural one: What does the Book of Proverbs teach about controlling our speech? A useful and memorable answer is found in the acronym FACTS, drawn from the work of Kenneth Wingate in his volume A Father’s Gift, published by The Banner of Truth Trust. The five letters stand for Few, Apt, Calm, True, and Sweet, and together they draw out the abundance of Proverbs teaching on the tongue with great clarity.

III. Few

The first letter, F, stands for Few. Proverbs consistently praise restraint in speech. Proverbs 17:27 and 28 clearly say: “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” In Proverbs, knowledge and understanding are marks of the wise. To hold back words, then, is linked to wisdom itself.

The reason for this connection is rooted in the reality of human sinfulness. Because sin originates in the heart, adding more words does not prevent transgression. Proverbs 10:19 makes this explicit: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” If we speak endlessly and without reflection, we simply multiply the opportunities for sin. The person who speaks before thinking is especially vulnerable. Proverbs 29:20 observes, “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

Mark Twain is credited with the observation that it is better to keep one’s mouth closed and let people think you a fool than to open it and remove all doubt. Whether or not he had Proverbs 29:20 in mind, the insight is sound. When we speak irresponsibly, particularly out of anger or pride, we are all but certain to sin in the process.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 reinforces this from a different angle, urging the reader not to be rash with his mouth before God, and warning that “when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.” Whether before God or before our neighbors, the discipline of few words is the path of the wise.

The Proverbs also caution against the relentless need to express an opinion. Proverbs 18:2 offers a pointed warning: “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but only in expressing his opinion.” And Proverbs 18:13 adds, “He who answers before listening, that is his folly and his shame.” The person who is already formulating a reply while another is still speaking has not truly listened, and the result is both rude and unwise.

There is hardly a person alive who has not said something and immediately wished it unsaid. The wisdom of Proverbs in such moments is clear: keep your words few.

IV. Apt

The second letter, A, stands for Apt. To say that words should be apt is to say that they should be fitting, suitable, appropriate, and well-timed. The word carries the sense that not only the content of speech matters, but also the occasion and the moment in which it is offered.

It is important to clarify from the beginning that the call to speak few words does not mean that Proverbs encourages silence as a general rule. We are not monks under a vow, nor are we called to the enforced quietness found in some monastic traditions, as if speech itself were a problem. Words are gifts from God, through which the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is proclaimed and received. Proverbs itself urges us to speak up: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). There are times when silence would be a failure of love and justice.

What Proverbs commends, then, is not silence but discernment. Proverbs 15:23 captures the joy of getting this right: "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply, and how good is a timely word!" A word spoken in season, whether it is a word of comfort, of rebuke, of counsel, or of encouragement, is a great gift to the one who receives it. There is help for the hearer and joy for the speaker.

The challenge is knowing when the moment is right. Proverbs 23:9 counsels, "Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words." And Proverbs 26:4 adds, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." Not every situation calls for a response. Not every provocation requires an answer. The wisdom to know when to speak and when to remain silent is itself a mark of maturity.

The beauty of apt speech finds its most poetic expression in Proverbs 25:11: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." The image is rich. The word is first compared to gold, which is inherently valuable and attractive. Then it is shaped into a beautiful form, apples of gold, its value enhanced by skill and artistry. And then it is presented in a setting of silver that enhances and frames its beauty all the more. Wise words, spoken at the right time in the right way, have that kind of threefold excellence: they are inherently valuable, skillfully formed, and fittingly delivered.

V. Calm

The third letter, C, stands for Calm. Proverbs has much to say about anger and the harm it causes, especially through speech. Proverbs 14:17 simply states, “A quick-tempered man does foolish things.” A short fuse of a person and wise words do not last long together.

Proverbs 16:32 sets a high standard: “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” In the ancient world, conquering a fortified city was the greatest military achievement. God says that mastering one’s own temper is an even greater victory. Anger is often connected in Proverbs to the foolish use of words. Proverbs 20:3 states, “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.”

The Apostle Paul discusses the same danger in his letter to the Colossians: “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Colossians 3:8). The link between uncontrolled anger and harmful speech remains consistent throughout the New Testament. These are not separate issues but two forms of the same underlying problem of the heart.

Self-control is the essential virtue here. Proverbs 25:28 gives a striking image: “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.” In the ancient Near East, city walls were not decorative. They were the difference between security and conquest, between order and chaos. A person who cannot govern his anger has left himself exposed, his defenses down, sin’s enemy free to range through the interior. Calm speech is not passivity or indifference. It is the fruit of a heart that is genuinely under the lordship of the Spirit.

VI. True

The fourth letter, T, stands for True. Among all the topics related to speech in Proverbs, the contrast between truth and falsehood is the most frequently discussed. Wisdom in using words is always, without exception, connected to speaking the truth. This isn't surprising considering that the Lord Jesus Christ himself embodies wisdom and is the way, the **truth**, and the life. He begins his most solemn statements with the words, “I tell you the truth,” because he is the God of truth. He calls his people to be people of truth as well.

Proverbs 12:19 states, “Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.” The contrast is between permanence and transience. Truth outlasts the lie every time. Charles Bridges, in his magisterial commentary on Proverbs, observed that if we kept eternity in view as we spoke, the lasting value and permanent results of truth would become plainly visible, while the fleeting nature of the lie would expose its poverty.

Proverbs 12:22 states: “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.” The word "abomination" is one of the strongest expressions of divine disapproval in the Hebrew scriptures. Proverbs 6:16-19 lists seven things that the Lord hates, including a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies. Dishonesty is not a minor failing in God's eyes; it is a direct attack on his character.

The Book of Proverbs identifies several particular forms of untruthful speech that deserve attention. The gossiper, sometimes called the tale-bearer or whisperer in Proverbs, appears frequently and is consistently associated with folly. Proverbs 26:22 acknowledges the peculiar appeal of gossip with characteristic realism: “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s in most parts.” Gossip is tempting because it satisfies something in our fallen nature. But Tremper Longman, in his commentary on Proverbs, rightly observes that rumors are negative reports about other people based on uncertain evidence, spread to injure rather than to help, and that even if a rumor turns out to be true, that does not exonerate those who passed it along to inappropriate people at an inappropriate time. Gossip fails every element of wise speech simultaneously. And Proverbs 16:28 adds the relational cost: “A gossip separates close friends.”

The Apostle Paul includes gossip and slander among the perversions that mark those who have suppressed the knowledge of God (Romans 1:29-30), a sobering reminder that what may seem like a minor social fault is, in fact, a symptom of profound spiritual disorder.

Slander involves intentionally damaging another person’s character. It is rooted in hatred. Proverbs 10:18 states, “The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.” And David, in Psalm 101:5, declares that the one who slanders his neighbor in secret will be silenced. The same Hebrew word for slander appears in Genesis 37:2, where the young Joseph reports negatively about his brothers to his father Jacob, a detail that shows how common and destructive slander can be, even among family.

Closely related to the liar in Proverbs is the flatterer. Proverbs 26:28 links them directly: “A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.” The Hebrew word for flattery means smooth, the same word used in Proverbs 5:3 to describe the speech of the adulteress. Flattery is insincere praise used as a tool for manipulation. It may seem harmless or even pleasant in the moment, but Proverbs 29:5 warns, “Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet.” The trap catches the flatterer just as much as the one being flattered.

To summarize, Proverbs teaches that wisdom speaks the truth, and that truthful speech is rooted not in self-interest but in genuine concern for others. As Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, the man of God is to stand firm “with the belt of truth buckled around your waist” (Ephesians 6:14). Truth is not merely a virtue among others. It is the foundational piece of the armor.

VII. Sweet

The fifth and final letter, S, stands for Sweet. Proverbs 16:24 offers one of the most beautiful descriptions in the entire book: “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” The wise person whose words are consistently kind, encouraging, and life-giving is like someone who carries honey with them everywhere, offering sweetness and nourishment to everyone who comes near.

The Apostle Paul echoes this idea in Colossians 4:6: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” Grace-filled speech is neither weak nor empty. It is flavorful, purposeful, and nourishing. It meets people where they are and offers something genuine.

Our words should be sweet because God’s words to us are sweet. Psalm 19:7 through 11 describes the Word of the Lord as perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, and sure, ending with this: “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.” The Word of God is more valuable than gold and sweeter than honey. Our words to each other should reflect that same generous, life-giving quality, because we have received such words from him.

VIII. Conclusion

The teaching of Proverbs about the tongue is abundant, but it can be summarized into five key principles, each revealing a different aspect of wise speech. Words should be Few, meaning they are restrained, thoughtful, and deliberate. They should be Apt, meaning they are appropriate for the moment, well-timed, and truly helpful to the listener. They should be Calm, meaning free from the chaos of uncontrolled anger and rooted in the self-control that the Spirit provides. They should be True, meaning grounded in honesty, free from gossip, slander, and flattery, and consistent with the character of the God of truth. And they should be Sweet, meaning gracious, encouraging, and kind, following the example of the God whose words to us are sweeter than honey.

Ephesians 4:29 draws all of these aspects together: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Thoughtful words. Truthful words. Timely words. Words that build rather than destroy. This is what Proverbs calls us to, and it is a calling that reaches into every conversation, every relationship, and every ordinary day of life in the presence of God. May our gracious God grant to each of us wisdom in the use of our tongues.

Select Scripture References

James 3:1-12, Proverbs 18:21, Proverbs 10:11, Proverbs 15:4, Ephesians 4:29, Matthew 12:34, Matthew 12:36-37, Proverbs 17:27-28, Proverbs 10:19, Proverbs 29:20, Proverbs 18:2, Proverbs 18:13, Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, Proverbs 31:8-9, Proverbs 15:23, Proverbs 23:9, Proverbs 26:4, Proverbs 25:11, Proverbs 14:17, Proverbs 16:32, Proverbs 20:3, Colossians 3:8, Proverbs 25:28, Proverbs 12:19, Proverbs 12:22, Proverbs 6:16-19, Proverbs 26:22, Proverbs 16:28, Romans 1:29-30, Proverbs 10:18, Psalm 101:5, Proverbs 26:28, Proverbs 29:5, Proverbs 16:24, Colossians 4:6, Psalm 19:7-11, Ephesians 6:14.